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Fool's Literature

a definition, 2001–2009

Conceived chiefly in the belief that 1) grotesqueries,
When mocked en masse, perform (via the author's screed)
A public service, or that 2) one lonely

fool can delve
Into a king's taboos uncensored, today *f. l.* resigns itself

To the endangered genre shelf, and our vices multiply
Minus poetic

punchlines. Therefore *f. l.*'s decline rides
(We think) on this conundrum: if fools perfect
Their ribald shtick to critique the powerful, and each joke

Holds since jokers stake no courtly claims, who speaks
Truth to a king crowned in cap and bells, chewing hayseeds?
To wit—

somewhere in Texas a village has lost its idiot—
And whatever slurs we'd add, and the bumper-sticker bouts

Continue. So one setup's shot, and the nation's stage so thick
With fools

another won't reveal a hubris grown endemic
Or even elicit giggles. Still, can this account for our satire's
Retirement when *f. l.*'s second mode sprang from a similar

Era? Brant's *Narenschiff* (c. 1494) is the paradigm example:
Here the author concedes a surplus of fools and calls on *f. l.*
To catalogue

the lot and ship them off in a boat
Built with rhyming couplets. Noting that composition date

We guess their destination: what's not yet America
Welcomes

the fools Brant exiles; one bloodline links us.
And yet attractive as this tactic is for trimming culture's fat,

Its new practitioners illustrate the pitfalls: every night

Our cable news makes a charade of blame, charges folly.
Were our own lit to take this tack (for anger, O'Reilly-
Like can even incite

poetics) it'd surely be writ for fools
And we'd all be talking heads, nodding in sync until

We nodded off together. Still, the approach carries
Its seductive charms, and we are, from time

to time, guilty
Of submitting. But let's return to *f. l.*'s disuse and the tide
Of fools rising up to our neckties. How do we resize

An old genre to fit today's misdeeds? Can our zeitgeist
Be satirized inside its musty structure? Some scholars suggest
The answer's no further

than a bookshelf, citing Shakespeare's
Recycled plots and the sestina's second wind to bear

Out their claim that literature's forever a continuum
And *f. l.*'s just in abeyance.

Others disagree, would drum
Up the genre now, believing in this single creed:
No canon ever boomed again until it got reloaded.

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